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LANGUAGE SOCIOLOGICAL TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICAN NDEBELE COMMUNITIES: A PILOT SURVEY

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This article presents the results of a 2016 language sociological survey focusing on the language choices and practices of two different Ndebele-speaking communities in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, the two north-eastern provinces of South Africa. The survey shows the prevailing dynamics in these multilingual environments, in both the private and public spheres. One of the main differences between the investigated groups is that in Mpumalanga, Ndebele is the dominating language in its surroundings, whereas in Limpopo, the local Ndebele variety is in the position of a minority language. From the perspective of daily practices and attitudes, Northern Sotho often dominates in this particular case. The different perceptions of the implementation of language policies, and the attitudes of individual speakers with respect to private and public use of the two Ndebele variants, suggest that further research is needed in order to shed more light on the language sociological status of Limpopo Ndebele in particular. The survey consisted of a pilot sample of three different groups: 1) speakers of the Mpumalanga Ndebele variety, which corresponds to isiNdebele and has official status in South Africa; 2) the significantly divergent Limpopo Ndebele, which does not have any official status; and 3) a control group sample from Mokopane town.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on a language sociological survey which was carried out in the two north-eastern provinces of South Africa, namely Limpopo and Mpumalanga in May 2016.[1] The interviews providing the data analyzed below were made during the fieldtrip of the HALS (Helsinki Area and Language Studies) research

1 We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the numerous people who gave their time to respond to the questionnaire and helped us with collecting the data. We are especially grateful to our local research assistants and coordinators Mmadi Kekana, Kenneth Ngoloti, Spanya Lebelo, Emmanuel Ledwaba, Jerry Malebana, Simon Ndalan, Stephane Mduduzi, and Godfrey Thubane. We appreciate highly our collaborators in the HALS team who were ready to share their time by filling the questionnaire with their informants while focusing on other linguistic and sociolinguistic issues. Thanks to members of the HALS team during the fieldwork in South Africa: Lotta Aunio, Axel Fleisch, Heini Arjava, Andrei Dumitrescu, Jaakko Helke, Kati Helenius, Jukka Kajala, Antti Laine, Riikka Länsisalmi, Matti Miestamo, Nailya Philippova, Stephan Schulz, Niina Väisänen, Maikki Järvi, Mimi Masango, Isalee Jallow, Aino Pesonen, and Lena Seppinen.

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community by researchers and students of the University of Helsinki (Finland) in collaboration with local research assistants and coordinators. The general aim of the fieldtrip was to investigate the contemporary language situations of several linguistic varieties that are collectively referred to as South African Ndebele. Our specific objective was to conduct a sociological pilot study whose goal was to bring to light prevailing language practices and choices in a multilingual environment, in both private and public spheres.

While the main aim of the fieldwork trip was to investigate South African Ndebele varieties from different linguistic angles, this report focuses on the language sociological conditions in two different language communities which both identify themselves as Ndebele. Despite the common ethnonym, linguistic differences exist between the languages of the two Ndebele communities in the country, a fact that is mentioned in earlier works (Wilkes 2001; 2007; Ziervogel 1959: 3–6), but which has not been sufficiently researched so far. The difference between the two Ndebele languages was mentioned by some interviewees in the present study and, conceivably, is relevant in terms of the language sociological status of both variants. Although linguistic taxonomy as such does not imply any language sociological differences, in this case study, one of the issues demanding further investigation is the different language sociological conditions in the two Ndebele communities, their relationship to the local variant as a language of daily communication, and more detailed linguistic differences between the two Ndebele variants. From the perspective of daily practices and attitudes, one of the main differences is that in Mpumalanga, Ndebele is the dominating language in its surroundings, whereas in Limpopo the local Ndebele variety is in the position of a minority language in a context where Northern Sotho often dominates. Furthermore, the discussion of the status of individual languages and their local variants has special importance from the perspective of linguistic rights. IsiNdebele is recognized as one of South Africa's eleven official languages. However, the different perceptions of the implementation of language law and the relationship of individual speakers with respect to public use of the two Ndebele variants suggests that further research is needed in this area as well.

The interviews were first made in the surroundings of Mokopane in Limpopo, mainly in the villages of Mosesetjane, Ga-Mashashane, and Mosate, after which the work continued in the northern part of the province of Mpumalanga, mainly in the townships and villages of Siyabuswa and Emthambothini (Weltevrede) (see Figure 1 for the fieldwork locations). Linguistically, these two areas are divided between between two different Ndebele varieties, as described in the following paragraph. Although these two provinces neighbor one another, historically, the Ndebele communities do not. The background of the two Ndebele groups is

different and, presumably, there have not been recent direct contacts between the two areas that influence the language. Both variants are used in a multilingual environment, as are all South African languages.

The South African Ndebele variety spoken in the Limpopo province, whose speakers call it Sindebele, is sometimes referred to as "Northern Ndebele". Brenzinger (2017: 45), for instance, adheres to this use when writing about its lack of official status in South Africa. More commonly, however, the term

Figure 1 Settlements of Mpumalanga Ndebele and Limpopo Ndebele speakers visited by the HALS team in 2016.[2]

2 Map of South Africa from Wikimedia Commons (author Htonl): <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Map_of_ South_Africa_ with_English_labels.svg>; map of Mpumalanga and Limpopo regions © 2018 AfriGIS (Pty) Ltd, Google, the tags to the visited settlements with their accompanying names added by the authors.

"Northern Ndebele" is used to refer to the Zimbabwean Ndebele variety, also often simply labelled "Zimbabwean Ndebele" (e.g. van Wyk 1966). The South African and Zimbabwean varieties are spoken in different areas and are different Bantu languages – despite the misleading practice of calling both of them Northern Ndebele.

Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2019) lists two Ndebele languages: the first one referred to as Southern Ndebele, a statutory national language of South Africa spoken in Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces with 1.1 million first language speakers; and the second one referring to Zimbabwean Ndebele, with an estimated 1.6 million speakers. The Limpopo variety, that is, the more northerly variety within South Africa, is not listed as a separate entry in this source.

The Zimbabwean Ndebele variety bears fairly close genealogical ties to isiZulu – more so than the linguistic varieties carrying the name Ndebele that are used in South Africa. Note that all linguistic varieties labeled as "Ndebele" as well as Zulu belong into the Nguni language cluster, a sub-family of southern Bantu languages.

Another important sociological factor that strongly influences the Ndebele communities in both Limpopo and Mpumalanga is rapid population growth. The high number of children and young adults plays an important role in the way language is used and transferred between generations. It also affects considerably the use of different languages in various daily activities. Compared to earlier language sociological settings, one of the main differences is that in the contemporary world, the models of language use are taken from a much larger array of alternatives, not only the nearest neighboring contacts. In addition to family, friends and relatives, school and education play an increasing role in the choice of greetings, words, phrases, and language. Hence, eventually, demography and population growth should also be taken into account in more detailed sociological analyses concerning the education, social structures, and language planning in the investigated areas and other similar environments. As regards the current study, parameters such as population size, density, and mobility cannot be considered systematically, because this would require more detailed population data.

1.1 Group identification and terminology

In multilingual communities, there are both group-internal and group-external ways of labeling a particular community and individual people on the basis of their language or other cultural characteristics. Ethnonyms such as English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, and Tsonga that denote a language or its speakers have connotations indicating a special relationship between a language, geographical

area, and social and economic contexts. However, these kinds of labels emerge and are used in different ways in various areas and contexts.

Speakers of the two Ndebele varieties of South Africa do not distinguish them based on a geographical contrast between North and South. Locality and contrast with other local languages such as Northern Sotho, Tsonga, and English plays a more important role, as Ndebele speakers simply relate their language with other local languages instead of emphasizing a distant and often non-existent relationship with the other Ndebele community. In order to decrease ambiguity between different labels, we implement geographically based concepts of **Limpopo Ndebele** (corresponding to South African Northern Ndebele, alternatively Sindebele) and **Mpumalanga Ndebele** (Southern Ndebele, alternatively isiNdebele) in the following analysis.

1.2 The aim of the survey

The purpose of this report is to shed light on the South African Ndebele communities from a language sociological perspective on the basis of the information collected from people that use or have used Ndebele varieties. Like other branches of sociology, but unlike more theoretical linguistic approaches, we identify and describe everyday practices and attitudes affecting the Ndebele varieties through an extensive set of detailed questions. In principle, this kind of information – a snapshot of a specific language sociological scenario – can always be obtained from the members of a given speech community. However, times change, and people move, which has a direct influence on the position of an individual and his or her language in a community. Therefore, an academic study can give a larger picture in the form of a horizontal crosscut made at a limited time and point out the contexts of separate phenomena. Most commonly, people do not repeatedly consider their language choices while talking to people in different places. We may know what language people we meet are most likely to speak, and we may assume that a certain language is not used in a certain environment. Thus, the choice of language often emerges from our own experience. A cross-sectional analysis of different parameters in language choice is one of the most concrete results a language sociological analysis may produce. The results can be used in sustainable language planning that seeks to produce contemporary tools for a given language and to support language diversity as an invaluable part of cultural heritage. The main aims of the current paper and the pilot survey are the following:

(1) To give a concise language sociological overview of prevailing language practices in two South African Ndebele communities, using the evidence of a fieldwork survey.

(2) To contextualize the two investigated Ndebele variants in terms of South African language policies.
(3) To show different language sociological trends of the two Ndebele communities as illustrated in the answers of different age cohorts and the data of the survey sample.

The fieldtrip of the HALS team in South Africa in May 2016 confirmed earlier impressions that instead of investigating one Ndebele language, as the current South African language policies suggest, the two Ndebele communities in Mpumalanga and Limpopo must be investigated separately. This decreased the total number of answers of one community, whereas an increase in variance between answers correlated with their different language sociological status.

The survey consists of a pilot sample of three different groups. These are: 1) speakers of the Mpumalanga Ndebele variety, which corresponds to isiNdebele and has official status in South Africa; 2) the significantly different Limpopo Ndebele variety, which does not have any official status; and 3) a randomly selected control group sample collected in Mokopane town, representing more broadly the occurrence of different languages spoken in the area and a more urban environment. The two first samples are the Ndebele communities focused in this report. The third sample is the smallest one and consists of a simple control test of how multilingualism is manifested in more general terms, and to what extent Limpopo Ndebele is represented among other languages of the area.

In language sociological studies, cross-comparison is normally done between variables such as age, sex, place of living, social status, language competence, and use of language in different domains. For this purpose, the size of the survey sample is not fully sufficient because a higher number of language sociological variables decreases the number of respondents matching the selected parameters. The number of male respondents, for instance, is higher than female. However, women traditionally play a significant role in the intergenerational transmission of language in language communities. Therefore, the answers must be interpreted with some caution. Finally, the information collected by means of the questionnaires could be compared with qualitative data collected during the interviews and other HALS fieldwork teams. This, however, will be done only in a very marginal way in this pilot survey.

1.3 The method of the survey sample

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews. The interviews were structured and conveyed following the order of questions in the questionnaire prepared for the fieldtrip and local language environment (see Appendix I). The

questionnaire applied the model of a considerably larger version originally used in the project ELDIA, European Language Diversity for all (for more details, see <eldia-project.org>; also the comparative report by Laakso et al. 2016; for case studies, cf. Karjalainen et al. 2013; Puura et al. 2013). This was an international comparative research project focusing on European minority languages. In the present case, the questionnaire was adjusted so that it would be relevant to the multilingual environment in South Africa. Thus, it included more specific questions concerning competence in and use of local languages. All information was gathered so that the anonymity of respondents was fully protected.

The questionnaire was structured so that metadata concerning the background of the informant was presented first, beginning with the place of the interview, age, sex, and place of living. This was followed by questions concerning language use with family members and the closest relatives. More specific attention was paid to language(s) used as the medium of instruction when the informant received their education. Additional questions were mainly directed to speakers of the two Ndebele variants. The informants were requested to self-evaluate their knowledge of the language. They also commented on their frequency of language use in roughly ten different contexts. An even longer list of contexts was given in a question dealing with language use in the public sphere.

Besides the statistical pilot survey, thematic interviews were made with speakers of the two Ndebele variants, language activists, and stakeholders. This kind of qualitative data is not systematically included in the current report. However, if additional information concerning the use of the Ndebele variants and attitudes influencing everyday choices of language is relevant to our discussion, we occasionally refer to conversations with individual informants as well.

Some of the interviews were made during appointments organized by local research assistants. However, the vast majority took place in random discussions on streets of Ndebele settlements and their surroundings, both in Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Given that a statistically exhaustive sample should consist of a larger number of respondents than we interviewed, this report has to be taken as a pilot study based on a relatively narrow sample. However, we believe that as a pilot survey, it reveals significant language sociological trends and differences in the investigated communities. The data collected using structured questionnaires and interviews, for instance, shows some sociological variation between different age cohorts and divergence in the use of Ndebele in various contexts. The presence of the two Ndebele variants in public sphere is not uniform, showing dissimilarities in the use and relevance of the language outside of (for example) family and educational

contexts, which in turn has special importance for the parallel use of languages in everyday life.

1.4 The data and questionnaire

The fieldwork in the investigated area lasted less than three weeks. The participants of the HALS fieldtrip group focused on different topics and, accordingly, were divided into subgroups. Two subgroups mainly concentrated on language sociological issues. The authors of the current paper took the main responsibility of sampling the data and collecting basic language sociological information. Other HALS teams provided additional data in the form of filled questionnaires.

The data received from the questionnaires is drawn from 18 basic questions. The questionnaires were in English. In most cases the informants could directly respond to questions in English, although there were some individual cases in which a local fieldworker assisted with the translation. Some interviews were carried out in either one of the Ndebele variants. The declared competence in a given language is based on the self-evaluation of the informants.

Altogether, 209 responses were collected for the first section of the questionnaire, consisting of 61 respondents in Mpumalanga province, 113 respondents in peri-urban and rural areas of Limpopo, and 35 from the town of Mokopane. Additional information was drawn from five question sets which requested more detailed information about the use of Ndebele in different domains. In the control group and a few other cases, this information was elicited for other local languages as well. There was some variance between the research group in the degree to which a given question was repeated and the alternatives were emphasized. Generally speaking, the interviewees were very focused on their role and had a positive attitude with respect to the themes discussed during the interview on the basis of the questionnaire. The additional question sets consisted of 38 variables, of which over 30 had three to five alternatives. Finally, many but not all interviewees were asked to determine the important languages of the research area without any hints as to what they might possibly be.

Interviews were made in both private and public spaces; this difference had only practical importance. Given that the informants were selected randomly, the place and environment could just as well be a private yard as a public street. The latter space was the main context of the more limited Mokopane control group sample made in town. The overall role of Ndebele was much more marginal in the Mokopane control group sample than in the local target groups at Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Interviewees were chosen in collaboration with local research assistants. This had special importance at Limpopo where the population is more mixed, and the main aim was to find Ndebele speakers, while at Mpumalanga almost everyone would speak the local variant of isiNdebele, the officially recognized language. Generally speaking, the sample focused on areas where Ndebele varieties are spoken, which was crucial for the selection of the given area as the target of the fieldtrip. People known to speak Ndebele were invited to participate in the survey sample in many places. Finally, people living in the same communities with the Ndebele speakers were also interviewed. In many cases, they spoke at least some Ndebele or had a Ndebele background.

After the fieldwork period, the data was organized so that the three different samples were kept apart from another in order to make comparisons between the three investigated groups. However, given that the same questionnaire was used in all interviews, the data also shows some general language sociological tendencies in the investigated area and is, within the limits of the local circumstances, an illustrative example of the perception and effects of language policies and contemporary multilingualism in South Africa.

Because it was not possible to collect the sample digitally and a mail survey was also out of the question, the organization and further elaboration of the data was done manually. The hypothesis behind the current study was that prevailing language sociological trends would be represented in the pilot survey despite the fact that from a statistical viewpoint, the size of the survey is not very big. Being fully aware of this fact, in addition to more general information about the Ndebele communities, basic sociological variables such as age, sex, education, place of living as well as language use with different generations were taken into account. In this case, too, the information concerning different age groups must be interpreted as somewhat tentative, due to the small sample size.

Structurally, the questionnaire consisted of five questions concerning the background of the informant (1–5), two questions focusing on the background of language use (6–7), ten questions concerning language use in the family of the informant (8–17), and one about language use at school (18). The language options listed in the questionnaire and mentioned during the interviews were Ndebele (unspecified), Afrikaans, English, Northern Sotho, Tswana and Zulu; that is, six of the eleven official languages of South Africa. Information was also requested concerning any other languages that the informant might know. Apart from the listed languages, Tsonga came up more frequently than other South African languages, which were mentioned only occasionally.

A more limited set of questions related to five language sociological variables were answered by a smaller part of the informants interviewed by the two

research teams who focused on language sociology. The question about learning a given language (i), which could be either Ndebele or some other language, included variables in place, such as home or school, and source, such as family members or neighbors. The informants were further asked to assess their language competence (ii) in speaking, understanding, writing, and reading, on the scale of five variables between "perfectly" and "not at all". The frequency of the use of a given language (iii) in public and private domains was inquired on the scale of four parameters, varying between "regularly" and "never". The fourth set of additional questions included statements about the desirability of the use of the given language with young or adult men or women (iv). Each of these included six answer options between the statements "I totally agree" and "I don't agree at all". Finally, the fifth thematic part was presented in the form of statements concerning the use of the given language in about fifteen different kinds of public domains (v). The three answer options were "yes", "no", or "I don't know".

Every questionnaire was filled out anonymously and assigned a unique number, along with a code indicating the research team. Only a few interviews were recorded during the fieldwork; some recorded interviews included additional qualitative information about the investigated topics, local languages and communities. The data is archived at the section of African Studies at the University of Helsinki.

1.5 The organization of this report

This report is organized as follows: we first give an overview of language policy in South Africa with special emphasis on the official and legislative status of Ndebele. Although the survey itself focused on the contemporary status and use of Ndebele, things related to language rights and the implementation of language policies often have a longer history. In South Africa, contemporary legislation is based on quite recent political changes and decisions, including constitutional support for multilingualism. The political history of South Africa is well documented and there are multiple descriptions of the rise and consequences of the power of white Dutch and British colonialists. While the recent development of political leadership and economic power is, to a large extent, a calque of establishing principally equal rights between white and black people, the history of language policies is much more difficult to follow. In practice, legislation determining language rights was prepared only in the 1990s after the political shift in 1994. The implementation of the formal principles of legislation has been underway only for slightly more than twenty years.

Basing the analysis on this background, sections 2.1 and 2.2 give a concise overview of the role of language as a political issue in South Africa as an introduction to the following sections. As mentioned above, during the fieldwork for the current pilot survey, interviews were first carried out among Limpopo Ndebele in the Mokopane area of Limpopo and the Northern Province, and were followed by the control group interviews in Mokopane and a similar survey at the province of Mpumalanga. In this report, we will proceed in the opposite order, presenting first the analysis of the Mpumalanga data, followed by discussion of the data collected in Limpopo. This order of presentation is motivated by the fact that the Ndebele variety spoken in Mpumalanga corresponds to the variety of Ndebele – called *isiNdebele* in the local language and also in the South African Constitution – that is recognized as one of the official languages of South Africa. The relationship between the northern variant at Limpopo – *Sindebele*, as the native speakers call it – and the official language Ndebele is more ambiguous and needs further investigation both in the light of the fieldwork and this report.

Section 3 reflects briefly on the main differences in the perception of the status of Ndebele in the two investigated communities. These reflections will later serve as a basis for the analysis of their language sociological asymmetry in the concluding sections (4.6 and 5).

The main outcome of the survey sample is presented in Section 4, based on the answers of the respondents and the division of the data into three subparts as described above in Section 1.3. The information is summarized in figures and tables. However, it must be emphasized again that it lacks statistical significance, and that further analyses on the same topic are needed.

2. THE NDEBELE LANGUAGE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

2.1 The main outlines of language policies in South Africa

The new Constitution of South Africa promulgated in 1996 commenced a new era in South African language policy. As written, the Constitution appears as one of the most democratic and progressive in the modern world (Heugh 2007: 187). From a linguistic viewpoint, it fundamentally contrasts with most constitutions in Africa that do not include as official languages the languages that are spoken by the majority of citizens (Brenzinger 2017: 41). Reflecting the prevalent multilingualism, South Africa currently has eleven constitutionally established official languages, granting them – in theory – equal status. Following the languages' own orthographies, the post-apartheid Constitution lists the eleven official

languages as Sepedi (Northern Sotho), Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu. It thus follows that while isiNdebele (Mpumalanga Ndebele) enjoys official recognition in the new Constitution, Limpopo Ndebele remains unrecognized. Curiously, this is despite the fact that the language was recognized during the apartheid regime (Stroud & Heugh 2003). As a result, the Northern Mandebele National Organisation has unsuccessfully carried out lobbying campaigns for the official recognition of the language (Stroud & Heugh 2003).

In reference to the officially recognized languages, the constitution (Chapter 1 Section 6, Article 2) stipulates that "the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages". In theory, the students have the linguistic right to receive education in any of the official languages, though this is qualified with the addition of "when reasonably practicable". The actual situation in language practice differs from the stated policy ideal and has frequently been characterized by terms such as a "gap between intention and performance" (Beukes 2009) and "policy-practice gap" (Orman 2008: 94) when discussing South African language policy. This refers to the gap between the stated policy and its actual implementation. The top-down approach with little regard for community support is one of the factors behind the inconsistency between official aims and actual behavior (Yu & Dumisa 2015). Also, while South Africa is an international outlier in embracing linguistic diversity in a constitution, having a large number of official languages has made both developing and implementing meaningful language policies challenging (Brenzinger 2017: 52). As a side effect, having eleven official languages has in fact contributed towards the dominating position of English (Brenzinger 2017).

Despite its shortcomings, the new post-apartheid language policy has taken steps towards embracing linguistic diversity in the country. In contrast to the historical English-Afrikaans bilingualism at the level of official languages, the post-apartheid era has witnessed several official efforts for promoting linguistic pluralism in South Africa. This has taken place through legislation and the foundation of new organizations. For instance, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), established in 1995, is responsible for the promotion of multiculturalism and developing the official languages in South Africa. Also, in 2012, the government issued the Use of Official Languages Bill aiming to elevate the status of South Africa's indigenous languages.

Understanding the history and development of language policy in South Africa provides a background against which it is possible to examine the current and historical status of the two Ndebele variants. During the apartheid era, language was used as a political tool to define the ethnic groups and thus to strengthen

the system that aimed for separate development of the white and black populations. Rather than multilingualism, the national language policy was formulated to support Afrikaans-English bilingualism, with only those two languages having an official status in the country. The language policy during the apartheid era was highly centralized and local actors generally had only a limited say over matters concerning language policy not aligned with the state's official policies (Jon Orman, pers. comm. 5 July 2016).

During the apartheid regime, the state established "homelands" (Bantustans) for the black population, essentially with the aim of creating ethnic homogeneity. Crucially, the homeland policy was based on the trinitarian notion of language = culture = homeland (Williams 2008: 103). In other words, language was equated with ethnicity, and then a homeland was assigned to the conceptualized ethnolinguistic group. The implemented measures used language as a tool to establish barriers among the black population, with the aim of impeding political and intellectual engagement at a national level (Brenzinger 2017: 42). The historical trajectories of the two Ndebele groups diverge in terms of applied homeland policy. The area extending roughly from Siyabuswa to KwaMhlanga was consolidated into the KwaNdebele homeland with the intention to settle (Mpumalanga) Ndebele speakers in this homeland. In contrast, the speakers of Limpopo Ndebele were dispersed over a wide area, and they were frequently perceived as bilingual in Northern Sotho. The formation of a separate homeland was therefore deemed unnecessary (Herbert & Bailey 2003: 75).

Against this backdrop, the homeland policy has had major repercussions for contemporary language policies in South Africa. In the post-apartheid era, in addition to Afrikaans and English, official status was given to the languages that had had an official homeland status during the apartheid era, leading to the exclusion of Limpopo Ndebele as a potential officially recognized language under the new Constitution. Consequently, the current linguistic policy indirectly reflects former apartheid-era views about language and ethnicity:

> [T]he post-apartheid regime has carried over the linguistic categorization of the African population that was imposed upon it by the apartheid regime. In doing so, they have also implicitly valorized many of the putative ethnolinguistic identities that were so dubiously and controversially ascribed to the black population by the apartheid government. (Orman 2008: 92)

Seen from the perspective of Ndebele, the fundamental problem of the current South African language policy lies in its excessive reliance on the homeland framework whose "one territory one language" mapping, an ideology that has its roots in European history and does not accurately represent the linguistic

reality of South Africa. In sum, the marginalized status of Limpopo Ndebele in contemporary South Africa derives directly from the linguistic policies of the preceding apartheid state.

2.2 Historical remarks of the two investigated Ndebele communities: Mpumalanga and Limpopo

As previously noted in this survey, the glossonym Ndebele is polysemous. In a similar fashion, the ethnonym Ndebele is equally polysemous, the term being applied both to the Zimbabwean Ndebele and the South African (Transvaal) Ndebele that further subbranches into the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Ndebele groups (Skhosana 2009: 19). As an ethnonym, the generic name Ndebele has thus three possible major referents. Nevertheless, the history of the three groups abounds in uncertainties, and theories proposed by scholars often contradict each other. Consequently, rather than giving an accurate history of the investigated Ndebele communities, this section attempts to address the most pertinent questions pertaining to their history by including various viewpoints from previous scholarship. The main issues are the mutual relationship of the Zimbabwean and South African Ndebele communities at the macro level, and that of Mpumalanga and Limpopo Ndebele at the micro level and their original homeland prior to migration.

The issues of the South African Ndebele communities' relationship with the Zimbabwean Ndebele has invited plenty of confusion. Seen in a historical light, it nevertheless appears that the South African and Zimbabwean Ndebele communities lack a direct relationship on par with that of the two South African Ndebele communities. Rasmussen (1978: 162) argues that the South African Ndebele communities represent an earlier immigration wave and are essentially unrelated to the Zimbabwean Ndebele community. The Zimbabwean amaNdebele are commonly identified as the descendants of chief Mzilikazi who fled the Zulu kingdom of Shaka. Mzilikazi subsequently founded the Ndebele Kingdom in present-day Transvaal and later moved it to contemporary Zimbabwe. Since Mzilikazi migrated from KwaZulu-Natal centuries after the original Ndebele migrations, the link between the Ndebele groups of South Africa and Zimbabwe is tenuous at best. Nevertheless, the exact nature of ethnic relatedness between the Zimbabwean and South African Ndebele communities remains unsolved, thus requiring further research.

At the micro level, the historical relationship between Mpumalanga and Limpopo Ndebele deserves closer examination. The groups have been proposed to stem from a single ethnic group due to their putative descendancy from

the same ancestral chief, Musi (Skhosana 2009: 20). This view interprets the current division between the two as originating from a tribal split. The death of the ancestral chief Musi was followed by two of his sons struggling for power: the eldest son Manala was appointed as the future chief, but he was challenged by his brother Ndzundza. As a result of the power struggle, while Manala and his followers remained in place, Ndzundza was forced to emigrate. This power contest triggered further conflicts, as two other sons, Mthombeni (also known as Gegana or Kekana) and Dlomo, left the original Ndebele group as well. Consequently, the succession struggle among the six (or five in some narratives) sons of Musi caused the division of what now corresponds to South African Ndebele people into two major branches: Southern and Northern, which correspond to the Mpumalanga and Limpopo Ndebele communities surveyed in this study. While the speakers of Mpumalanga Ndebele are seen as descendants of Manala and Ndzundza, those of Limpopo Ndebele descend from Mthombeni's group that moved further North.

The supporters of Mthombeni established themselves in the north around the area of the contemporary towns of Mokopane and Polokwane, where they became ancestors of the Northern Ndebele of South Africa. After further splits between groups, the Mugombhane section migrated to the area of present-day Mokopane, where its descendants are settled at present (Ziervogel 1959). There, it ultimately gave its name to Mokopane Town (previously known as Potgietersrus, the Afrikaans name), which had been established by the Vortrekkers who also moved to the neighborhood of South Africa's Northern Ndebele. As latecomers to the new region, the Northern Ndebele absorbed considerable cultural influence from more dominant groups, such as the surrounding Northern Sotho groups. The followers of Manala in turn migrated to the area of present Mpumalanga, where they became the ancestors of the Southern Ndebele. The above-mentioned narrative, focusing on a tribal split as the explaining factor, is nevertheless contested by some scholars, such as Ziervogel (1959: 5), who has proposed that the Southern and Northern Ndebele of South Africa are genealogically separate and have distinct ancestral chiefs.

South African Ndebele are generally seen to originate from the region currently known as KwaZulu-Natal. While still in KwaZulu-Natal, they belonged to the main Hlubi tribe, according to Massie (1905: 33). This view has later been contested at least for some Ndebele sections: Ownby (1985) assumes that their ancestors may have never migrated into the lowveld, that is the current KwaZulu-Natal province. Conflicting views exist also on the specific location of the historical homeland in KwaZulu-Natal (Skhosana 2010: 140). The departure is estimated to have happened approximately between the years 1630 and 1670 when

particularly dry and harsh conditions of the so-called Little Ice Age prevailed in the region (Huffman 2004: 95–96). In any case, this historical connection to the Zulu homeland has been the factor to trigger the debate whether South African Ndebele can be seen as a dialect of Zulu (Khumalo 2017: 103).

2.3 A language sociological outline of Ndebele in Mpumalanga and Limpopo

Sociologically, the investigated area is highly dynamic, with a high birth rate and large cohorts of children. The dominance of younger generations, a characteristic of many African areas, has special significance for the long-term development of the language sociological situation, as present-day choices often turn to everyday practices in the future. The use of different languages at home, with friends and relatives at school, in the media and in public sphere counts a lot in terms of the languages' functional development and especially intergenerational transmission. Everyday life seldom triggers a detailed discussion of language choices, which are most typically made on sociological grounds without assessing their influence in the long run. Language practices between social networks and public authorities may diverge considerably, the former being individually ruled whereas the latter predominantly reflects collective hierarchies.

2.3.1 IsiNdebele in Mpumalanga

The most fundamental language sociological differences between Ndebele speakers in Mpumalanga and Limpopo arise from these sociological variables. Individual people experience them differently, but a survey sample satisfactorily demonstrates common trends in both areas. In the following we will first proceed by representing Mpumalanga Ndebele as the default study of Ndebele's current language sociological state and then continue with Limpopo Ndebele as the publicly less well-established variety of Ndebele.

The answers concerning fundamental basic languages skills showed a very high competence in Ndebele at the Mpumalanga sample. Only a very few respondents claimed that they do not have writing and reading skills in the language, whereas the vast majority reported that they can both speak and understand the language perfectly (Figure 2). Even those rare respondents who actually were second-language speakers claimed that they can speak and understand the language at least fairly well. This kind of uniform language competence typically shows a very strong position of the given language in the investigated area. The degree of literacy in the areas of writing and reading skills shows large-scale implementa-

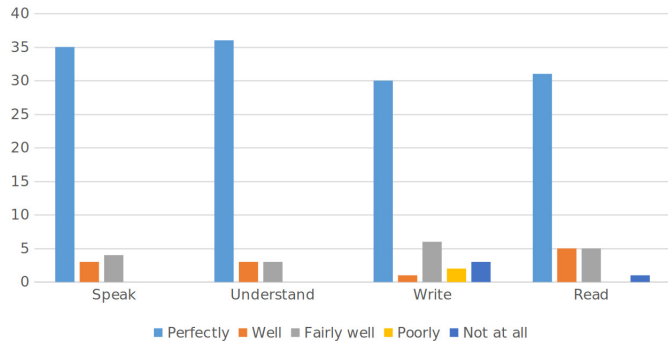

Figure 2 Basic language skills of the Mpumalanga Ndebele sample (sample size 42).

tion of the language as a literary variant as well. The minor differences in literary skills are mainly seen in the relatively higher number of respondents lacking literary skills among the older age cohorts.

Among the relatively few respondents of the older and middle-aged cohorts (Figures 3 and 4) fluent literary skills are not as self-evident as among younger ones. As noted above, the actual level of language knowledge was not tested. Consequently, the answers may partly reflect the somewhat hesitating attitude of the informants self-evaluating their skills. This kind of critical assessment of one's own skills is reflected in the columns showing less perfect knowledge of writing and reading. However, in absolute numbers this is a very small group, showing a distribution that is typical of writing and reading skills in almost any language, including the world's major languages.

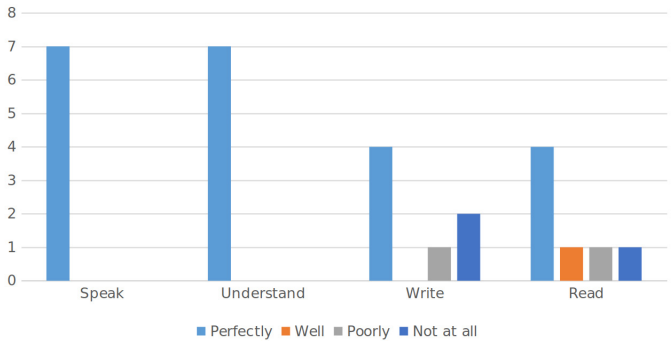

Figure 3 Basic language skills of the Mpumalanga Ndebele sample, age cohort 50–64.

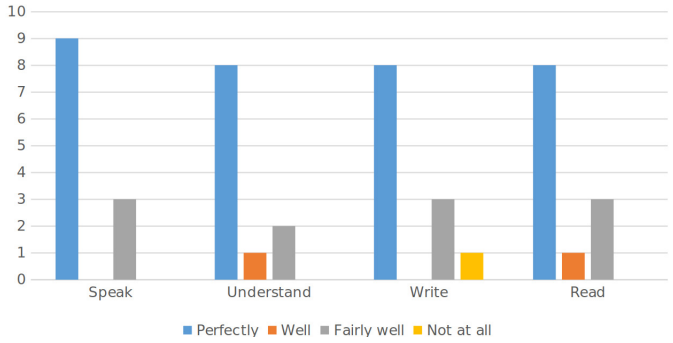

Figure 4 Basic language skills of the Mpumalanga Ndebele sample, age cohort 30–49.

As indicated in Figure 2, the overall language skills of Mpumalanga Ndebele speakers are very high, including literacy, which is strongest among the youngest age cohort consisting of young grown-up respondents (Figure 5). Here, too, some respondents maintain that their skills may be less than perfect and, in the case of randomly chosen respondents, some individuals turned out to be speakers of some other South African language instead. These kinds of highly uniform answers regarding basic language knowledge are, in principle, possible due to a publicly supported strong social position. The importance of public language services such as education involving the whole population play a key role in promoting basic skills in literary language.

In general, the information concerning both oral and literacy skills of Mpumalanga Ndebele speakers shows that its position as a vernacular language is strong. This observation will find further support in the investigation focusing on language use in private and public domains, below (see Section 3.1).

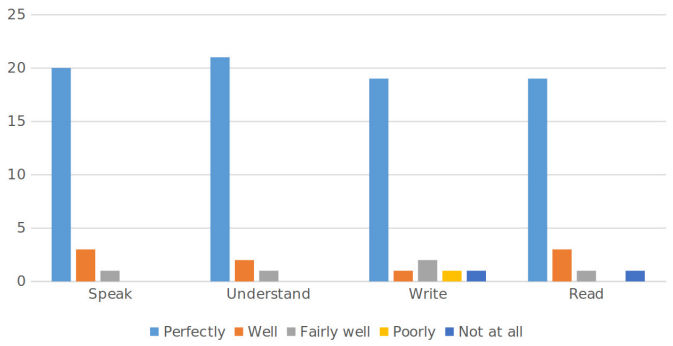

Figure 5 Basic language skills of the Mpumalanga Ndebele sample, age cohort 18–29.

The main contrast emerges in the comparison of the two different Ndebele populations, as the answers of the Limpopo Ndebele focus group yield more variance, especially in literacy skills. This, in turn, correlates with certain other divergences as illustrated by more detailed questions on language use (see Section 3.3.3).

2.3.2 Sindebele in Limpopo

Comparing the two Ndebele groups, the different language sociological status is most illustratively seen in charts indicating literary skills, both reading and writing (cf. Figure 2 above and Figure 6). In both target groups the respondents were purposively chosen on the basis of identifying them as Ndebele speakers, confirmed by native-speaking fieldwork assistants. The proportion of respondents lacking literary skills among Limpopo Ndebele survey participants is much higher than among the parallel survey at Mpumalanga. Furthermore, oral and literary skills show contrast at the Limpopo Ndebele sample as the vast majority of respondents claims that they have perfect or good oral skills in the language, whereas literary skills are significantly weaker, and mostly completely lacking.

The vast majority of the Limpopo Ndebele respondents consider their Ndebele speaking and understanding skills very fluent, mostly choosing the alternative "perfectly" (Figure 6). While speaking "well" might show the informants' modest attitude and hesitation with respect to their individual skills, claiming that they speak "fairly well" or only "poorly" is a more unambiguous indication that they have stronger language skills in some other language.

Comparing different age cohorts of the Limpopo Ndebele respondents, there is some divergence in the division of basic language skills between different age cohorts. Every subgroup responds, as a rule, that their oral skills greatly exceed their literacy skills. This tendency is most transparent among the two oldest age

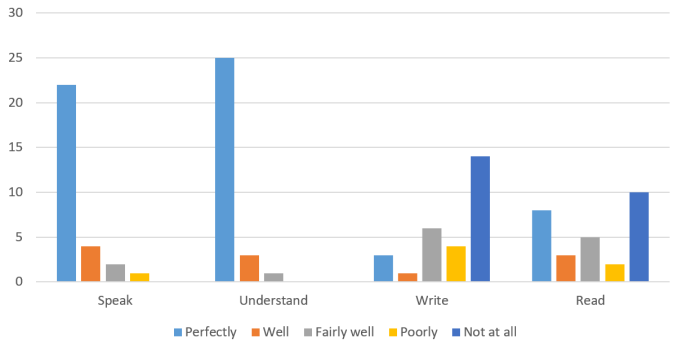

Figure 6 Basic language skills of the Limpopo Ndebele sample (sample size 29).

cohorts (Figures 7 and 8), although individual speakers may claim that they have some literacy skills as well, even perfect skills, which they have acquired through their own initiative without public support.

The pilot sample of older middle-aged speakers presents the most polarized contrast between oral and literacy skills, with respondents practically lacking any writing skills (Figure 8). A few respondents reported that they could read Ndebele fairly well, although the context of reading was not determined in more detail.

The experience of having read some texts in Ndebele or showing more interest towards a literary language, occasionally using written Ndebele in communications with friends, as well, for instance, increases the incidence of literacy skills among working-age adults (Figure 9) and young adults (Figure 10). Most notably, some respondents even claim that they can write and read the language perfectly, showing significant trends towards the increased literary use of their

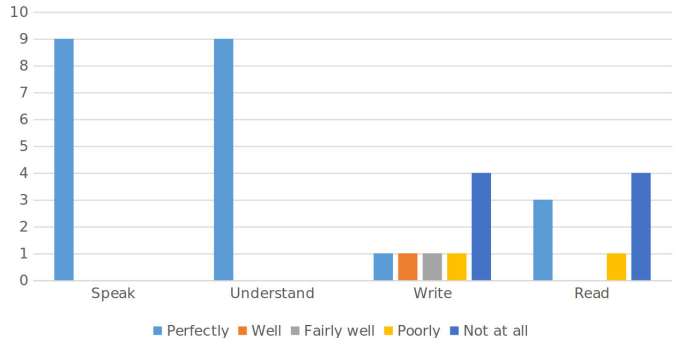

Figure 7 Basic language skills of the Limpopo Ndebele sample, age cohort 65–.

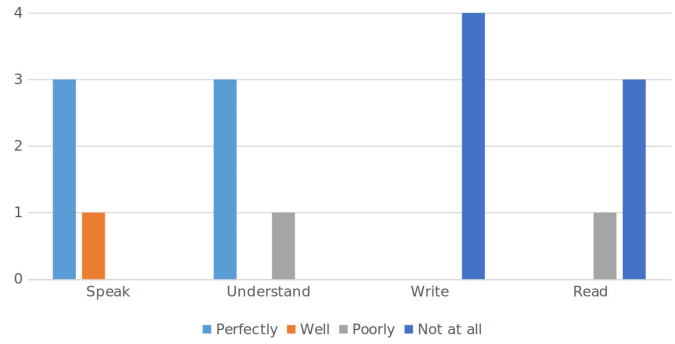

Figure 8 Basic language skills of the Limpopo Ndebele sample, age cohort 50–64.

language. This tendency increases even more among the target group of young adults (Figure 10).

Despite the common increase in literacy skills amongst the pilot sample population for the two youngest target groups, their charts in Figures 9 and 10 are far from uniform. Moreover, it must be emphasized that the size of the sample is small, and the overall picture is affected by individual speakers and their networks more than a larger sample would be. However, the preliminary result provided here suggests that the youngest group of Limpopo Ndebele speakers is most active in implementing oral skills also in writing (Figure 10). The self-assessment of how fluently they can use the language varies considerably, spanning the whole assessment scale, which corresponds to the lack of education and public support in the development of the literary and public use of Ndebele.

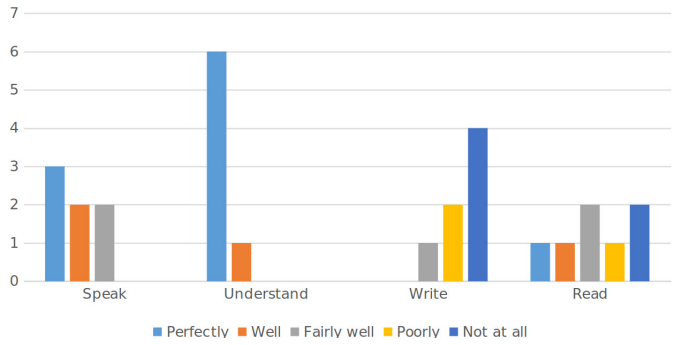

Figure 9 Basic language skills of the Limpopo Ndebele sample, age cohort 30–49.

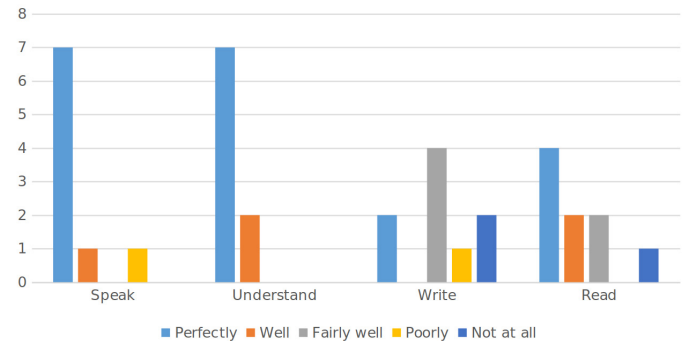

Figure 10 Basic language skills of the Limpopo Ndebele sample, age cohort 18–29.

Some informants from this particular group reported that a typical context for using Ndebele is the application of mobile phones in mutual communication, sending text messages in Ndebele, and so forth. Given the varying dynamics in the social trends of Limpopo Ndebele, language use in mobile communication and social media definitely needs further investigation, also in terms of possible effects on the development of oral skills.

3. LANGUAGE SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY IN NDEBELE COMMUNITIES

This section will extend the language sociological pilot survey of two Ndebele speaking groups in Mpumalanga and Limpopo to the use of these two variants in both the private and the public sphere. As the results in the previous section show, oral skills are largely considered to be very strong among the speakers belonging to both target groups, which implies that the use of spoken language in its traditional social and geographical environments is common. Compared to this, there is a clear difference in literacy skills, as Limpopo Ndebele speakers can write and read their language considerably less commonly, whereas Mpumalanga Ndebele speakers live in a society in which the local Ndebele variant dominates in both the private and public spheres. Also, basic education in Mpumalanga Ndebele strongly supports early acquisition of literary skills in Ndebele. The language sociological differences among the two Ndebele groups correlate with the use of the language in the public sphere, as will be shown below, whereas in the private sphere the differences are smaller, though some differing tendencies can be observed there as well.

3.1 Statistical survey of the use of Mpumalanga Ndebele in the private sphere

In the Mpumalanga sample, Ndebele is the dominating language in the private sphere (Figures 11 and 12). Despite the statistical dominance, the multilingual nature of South Africa is reflected in families that speak other languages in parallel, as well. Among other languages, not a single one is absolutely more common than the others. Ndebele sa Moletlane refers to a variety not originally spoken in the area of the former homeland of KwaNdebele, from where three respondents had migrated to Siyabuswa where the survey was mainly carried out. It is different from the Limpopo Ndebele varieties spoken by the people that we interacted with in the areas of Mokopane and Polokwane (see Introduction, Section 1). Several respondents spoke Northern Sotho with their grandparents,

but fewer used it with parents in the Mpumalanga sample (Figure 11). Likewise, Northern Sotho is a language relatively frequently used in intermarriages, but this does not have a direct effect on language use with children, who clearly live in an environment in which Ndebele is the dominating language (Figure 12). As a rule, neither of the languages of white settlers in South Africa, namely Afrikaans and English, is used with close older relatives among the Mpumalanga Ndebele.

While Northern Sotho continues to be quite frequent in intermarriages, two other languages emerge in the multilingual context of Mpumalanga Ndebele when used with respondents' closest younger relatives, namely English and Zulu. The increased use of English, though not shaking the overall balance at

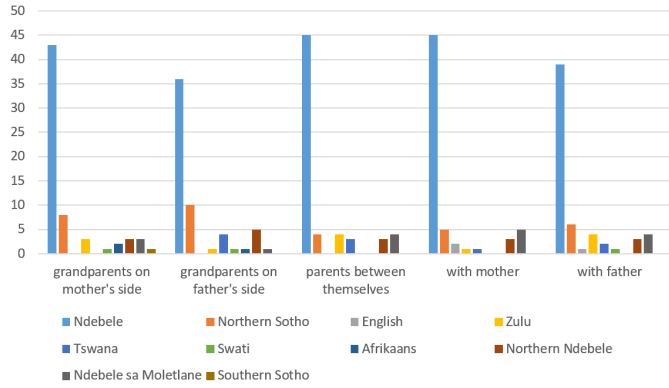

Figure 11 The languages used with closest older relatives, survey of Mpumalanga Ndebele.

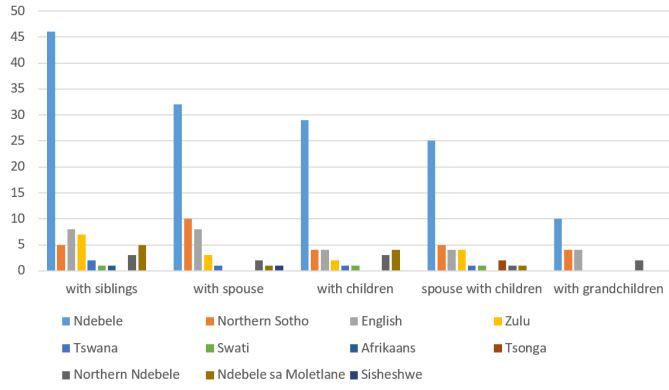

Figure 12 The languages used with closest younger relatives, survey of Mpumalanga Ndebele.

the investigated area, nevertheless reflects its high prestige and general visibility as the language of modern media. The same is partly true of Zulu, one of the most widespread languages in South Africa. However, in this case, Zulu is more typically a language descending from family-internal multilingual settings. More generally speaking, Ndebele is clearly the dominating language both with older and younger closest relatives at Mpumalanga, while the possible use of other languages is family-specific.

Compared to Mpumalanga, the multilingual context of the investigated Limpopo Ndebele areas is much more polarized. Besides Ndebele, Northern Sotho has a significant position as the second everyday language in the lives of many Ndebele speakers both in the private and especially the public sphere. In the private sphere, a language sociological difference can be noticed in the use of Ndebele and Northern Sotho with the respondents' closest relatives as, compared to use with older closest relatives (Figure 13), Northern Sotho is gaining a greater foothold as the language used with respondents' younger closest relatives (Figure 14).

A major contrast between the Mpumalanga and Limpopo Ndebele sample is seen in the use of other languages besides Ndebele in private sphere. While in Mpumalanga there are several languages that occur at random in the answers, in Limpopo, the strong position of Northern Sotho, reaching even an equal level of use with Ndebele in some charts, is striking. As regards language use with different age cohorts, there is a clear difference in the use of Ndebele and Northern Sotho with speakers' closest relatives. With older relatives, Ndebele is clearly used more often than Northern Sotho (Figure 13), one of the most publicly visible South African languages, whereas the proportionately greater use of Northern Sotho emerges clearly with younger relatives (Figure 14). Northern

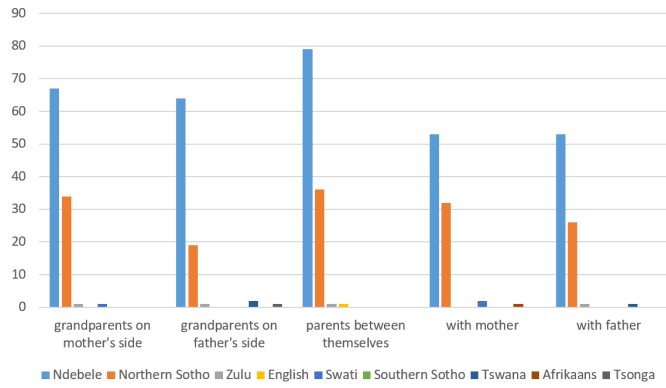

Figure 13 The languages used with closest older relatives, survey of Limpopo Ndebele.

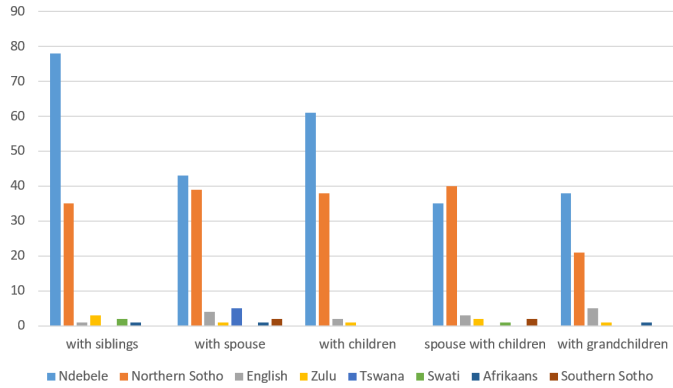

Figure 14 The languages used with closest younger relatives, survey of Limpopo Ndebele.

Sotho is used almost as frequently with spouses as is Ndebele, a trend evidencing the increasing number of linguistic intermarriages. Furthermore, Northern Sotho is much more commonly used with children than with parents or grandparents.

With grandparents and parents, other languages than Ndebele and Northern Sotho are very rarely used; with siblings, spouses, and children, they are used slightly, but not considerably more. Thus, the language sociological basic constellation focuses on the bilingualism between Ndebele and Northern Sotho.

Among other languages, English and Tswana were also mentioned as languages used with spouses, and in certain individual cases Southern Sotho and Zulu were also mentioned (Figure 14). However, these must be considered random coincidences that do not show any larger-scale tendencies. What Figures 13 and 14 show is the increasing importance of Northern Sotho as the language of communication within families among the Limpopo Ndebele.

3.2 Multilingual control group sample in Mokopane

As mentioned above, a randomly chosen and quantitatively even more limited control group pilot survey was carried out at Mokopane Town, the closest city to the Limpopo Ndebele speaking areas. This survey took place with some further methodological reservations, as local guides, with whom the team were working, sought to instinctively pick up people who might have Ndebele roots. Statistically, this data is inadequate and would need to be quantitatively more exhaustive.

Given that the overall number of Ndebele-speaking respondents was small, the Mokopane pilot sample, interestingly shows a different state of Ndebele as a language of communication in the private sphere with close relatives, a trend

which would most likely be seen in a larger sample, too. The dominating language in this sample is Northern Sotho as the default choice in all age cohorts. The local Ndebele variant, here labeled as Limpopo Ndebele, was more frequently mentioned as the "other" language used with one's grandparents on the mother's side, while otherwise, isiNdebele and Tsonga, the latter originally a language of more easterly areas, are the two languages that occur besides Northern Sotho in the Mokopane sample. Considering the three generations, Sindebele is more frequently used with grandparents and parents (Figure 15) than with younger relatives (Figure 16).

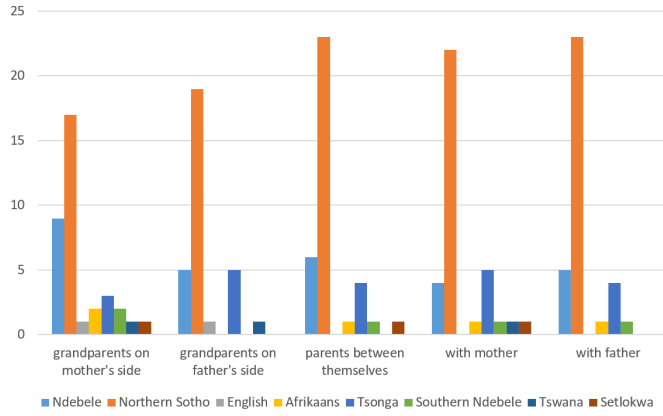

Figure 15 The languages used with closest relatives, control group of Mokopane Town.

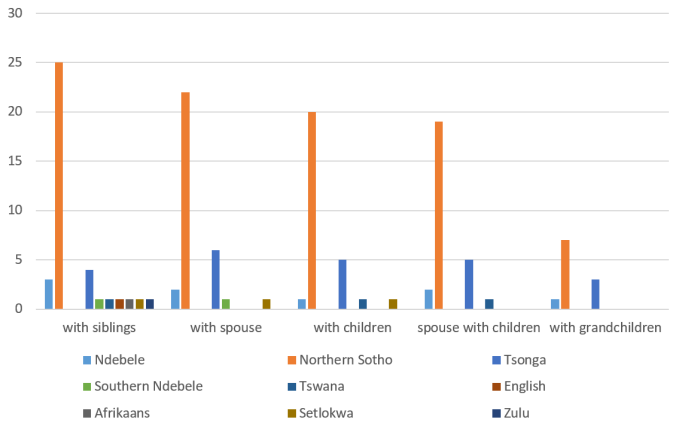

Figure 16 The languages used with closest relatives, control group of Mokopane Town.

In all three samples – Mpumalanga Ndebele, Limpopo Ndebele focus groups, and the Mokopane control group – there are individual families in which English is gaining a foothold as the language used with siblings or even with children. Other South African languages are mentioned less frequently; their use is mostly due to a family member originating from some other part of the country. Afrikaans, the politically dominating language during the twentieth century, is almost totally invisible: very rarely would people comment that they knew some Afrikaans. In some cases, these were the oldest respondents who had lived most of their life under an entirely different political system.

Languages mentioned in the randomly chosen pilot sample of Mokopane Town include Northern Sotho as the locally dominating language and other, less systematically reported languages such as Limpopo Ndebele (Sindebele), Xitsonga, Mpumalanga Ndebele (isiNdebele), Setswana, English, Afrikaans, Setlokwa, a variant of Northern Sotho, and isiZulu.

3.3 Statistical survey of the use of Ndebele in public sphere

This section discusses the findings concerning the use of Ndebele in the public sphere from a statistical perspective. Due to its importance for language use in the South African context, a subsection 3.3.2 is dedicated to offering background information on the domain of education.

3.3.1 School and education in South Africa

A recent World Bank survey found that since the end of the apartheid era, inequality in South Africa has increased, the country now having a Gini coefficient of 0.63, which indicates the highest income equality around the world (Sulla & Zikhali 2018). Similarly, contemporary South Africa is still reported to have one of the most unequal education systems in the world (Dzotsenidze 2018: 113). The system performs poorly, and many schools in predominantly black areas lack proper infrastructure and sufficient resources.

The roots of the current situation can be found in the apartheid era, the legacy of which continues to influence the current education system in South Africa. In the apartheid era, linguistic policy on education served the larger goals of the apartheid policies. Everyday literary events, such as the reading of books and newspapers, were conceptualized as a domain of white culture (Banda 2004: 13). Consequently, cultivating such domains among the black population was deemed unnecessary, a position that directly contributed to unequal education along racial lines. Also, at the macro level, language policies and practices at school were imposed on the black

population with little concern for their own desires and needs. In other words, policies determining the use of language in education for the black population of South Africa have historically never involved in their development the very people whom the policies directly concerned (Hartshorne 1995: 307).

Since the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the central issue in language policies and practices in the country has been the tripolar relationship between English, Afrikaans, and the indigenous African languages (Hartshorne 1992: 187). Shifts in the balance between the three elements have, at different historical stages, characterized their complex relationship. As a major watershed, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (aka Black Education Act) both centralized black education and enforced racially determined education, thus, in practical terms, ending the missionary education that had been playing a central role in educating the black population (Desai 2012: 34). Since the Act made it a legal norm to provide white South Africans with better education, it essentially institutionalized pre-existing inequalities in education. Subsequently, the Act also paved way to the Soweto Uprising of 1976 against the 50/50 imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction together with English. The Uprising was crushed brutally by the police, but had far-reaching consequences. The government was forced to abandon the policy, while English became the main language of instruction for black children from the fifth grade on (Desai 2012: 38).

Since the declaration of the 11 national languages that can be freely used in education, official racial segregation of schools ended in tandem with the dismantling of the structures of apartheid. As a result, some learners from black schools have moved into formerly colored or white schools, a process often also corresponding to movement of black students from rural to urban environments and change in the language of instruction from Afrikaans into English in some erstwhile white schools now dominated by black students (Banda 2004: 21). However, the new system has been implemented for barely more than two decades, and the legacy of inequality remains embedded in South African education. This inequality has further implications that have a bearing on the fulfillment of the country's democratic ideals. The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa enumerates domains, such as economic, political, and educational domains, in which it guarantees equal rights. Nevertheless, Banda (2004: 15) points out that if literacy functions as a barrier for accessing these domains, it thus also denies people their constitutional citizenship rights. Therefore, it can be said that unequal education puts citizens into unequal positions in practice, despite the rights guaranteed by the Constitution in theory.

The question of "mother tongue" education remains a contentious and emotionally charged issue in contemporary South Africa (Heugh 2002). From a historical

perspective, education of black South Africans has generally followed a pattern in which the initial stages are in "mother tongues", followed by English, the introduction of English being different in different historical periods (Desai 2012: 25). Currently, mother tongue education ends after the Foundation Phase, namely grades one to three. Many parents, however, prefer to send their children straight to English-medium schools from grade one on.

Using English as the medium of instruction has been blamed for the poor performance of black students. Indeed, it is increasingly demonstrated that children learn better in their mother tongue (see, e.g. UNESCO 2008). At the same time, the actual preference of English at the expense of the ideal, the various indigenous African languages, has been justified using various arguments. First, further development of the indigenous languages, such as creating new scientific lexicon, and standardizing and modernization of the written languages, is urgently needed before they can fully serve as the media of instruction. Second, in the post-apartheid era with freedom of movement, interaction between speech communities is taking place more frequently, especially in cities, which emphasizes the need for English skills for communication between different communities. Furthermore, English often yields prestige, and is thus seen as the preferred language for a good future, a view also corroborated by the field interviews of this study. Finally, the ubiquitous presence of English, and the far higher availability of English written materials vis-à-vis materials in African languages portray it as the best choice for literacy. All in all, the circumstances discussed above contribute towards creating a wide gap between ideals and practices in language use in educational domains.

3.3.2 IsiNdebele in Mpumalanga

The questionnaire used during the fieldwork of this pilot survey included further questions concerning the everyday use of isiNdebele in the public sphere. These survey sections investigated whether isiNdebele is used in a more limited context. Other languages were not mentioned as options that the informants could choose. The alternatives and institutions that were mentioned included education, both printed and electronic media, parliament and ministries, police and tax authorities, hospitals and health organisations, regional and municipal officials and courts, and advertisements. The difference between the two investigated groups is striking and involves many more language sociological differences that were not as transparent in the private sphere. A major difference in the use of the two Ndebele varieties is seen in the fact that, in the Mpumalanga sample, Parliament was considered as the only institution in which less than 50%

of the respondents replied that Ndebele is used (Figure 17). In the Limpopo sample, no domain reached the threshold of 50% of positive answers, while only hospitals and ministries were reported by more than 40% of the respondents as places where Ndebele is used.

The strong language sociological position of Mpumalanga Ndebele is shown by the fact that a vast majority, over 80% of the informants, replied that the language is used at school and education, corresponding to contemporary South African language policies (Figure 17). Furthermore, a very high percentage, at least nine out of ten, answered that Ndebele is used by the police, at hospitals, and on the radio, the latter demonstrating the importance of local radio broadcasts. Compared to its use in radio, the visibility of Mpumalanga Ndebele was not as high in television media, though clearly noteworthy, whereas the lowest rate within media was reported for printed media, having the same level as advertisements, that is about 50%. The ratios of all domains are presented in Figure 17.

The degree to which isiNdebele is used in local contexts was scaled somewhat differently. The informants were asked to determine whether they use it regularly, sometimes or never, the overwhelming majority in all cases being that isiNdebele is used at least sometimes, while the number of instances where speakers virtually never use the language was very small (Figure 18). Somewhat surprisingly, isiNdebele is reported to be used with neighbors even more regularly than with friends and relatives. These statistics together show a state of highly frequent use of isiNdebele as a language of oral communication (cf. language used with closest relatives, Figures 11 and 12, above). This is also confirmed by ratios showing the regular use of isiNdebele at home in most cases, while the lowest rank, showing

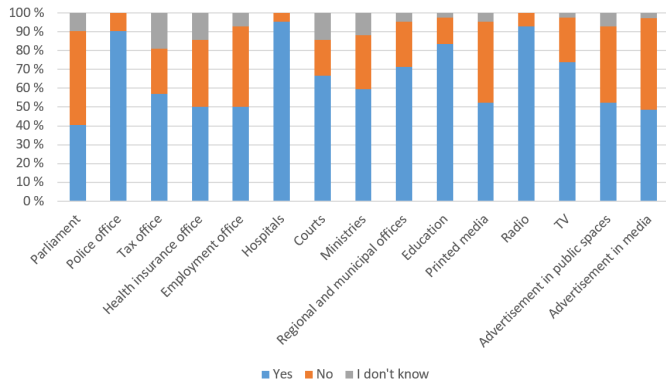

Figure 17 Reported use of isiNdebele in public domains: "Mpumalanga Ndebele is used in ..."

equal use between "regularly" and "sometimes" occurs in shops, which typically maintain a network that extends beyond local contacts and speech communities.

Besides shops, church is another institution that, in principle, is basically not local, but even there the frequent use of isiNdebele is reported in Mpumalanga. The same is valid for communication with public authorities, who still mainly consist of local people, and community events, bringing mostly local people together (Figure 18).

3.3.3 Sindebele in Limpopo

Compared to the use of Mpumalanga isiNdebele in public domains (cf. Figures 17 and 18) and the wide intergenerational applicability of Limpopo Sindebele in the private sphere (though showing some decrease in the use of Ndebele with younger relatives; cf. Figures 13 and 14 above), the use of Limpopo Ndebele in public domains stands in stark contrast.

The most frequent use of Sindebele in public domains in the Limpopo sample is found in hospitals and ministries and on the radio, showing the importance of local radio broadcasts in this area, as well. In these three domains, about 40% of the respondents reported that Sindebele was used. Around 30% of the survey sample replied that Ndebele is used in other domains in which local people largely determine the language they will speak for mutual communication, such as police and tax authorities, health insurance and employment officials, other regional and municipal officials. Apart from the federal level of Parliament, the lowest rates are seen within education, printed media and even advertise-

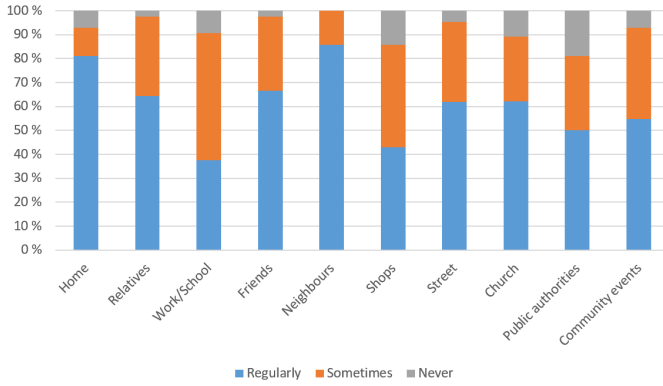

Figure 18 The use of isiNdebele in private and public space, Mpumalanga Ndebele sample.

ments, although these are not completely nonexistent, either. However, the low percentage of roughly 15% reporting the use of Ndebele in education probably reflects more the mutual communication of Ndebele speakers in school settings than the implementation of Sindebele as the primary language of education. The low frequency of Limpopo Ndebele used in education and printed media correlates with speakers professing weak or totally lacking literacy language skills (cf. Figures 6–10 above). This is also seen in the fact that Limpopo Sindebele is far less regularly used at work or school (Figures 19–20).

Considering the use of Sindebele in the private and public spheres, it is clearly more common in private contexts that favor the use of oral language. Thus, Sindebele is either regularly or at least sometimes used at home, with friends,

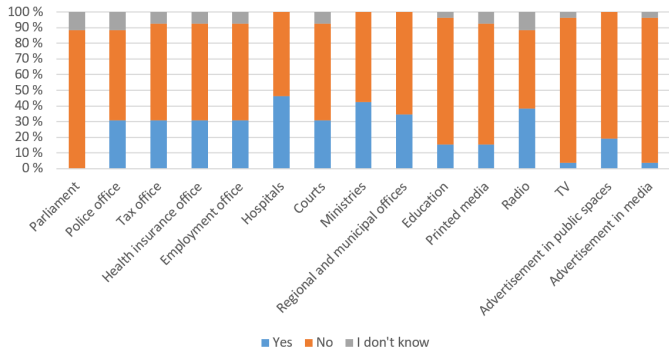

Figure 19 The use of Ndebele in public domains, Limpopo Ndebele sample.

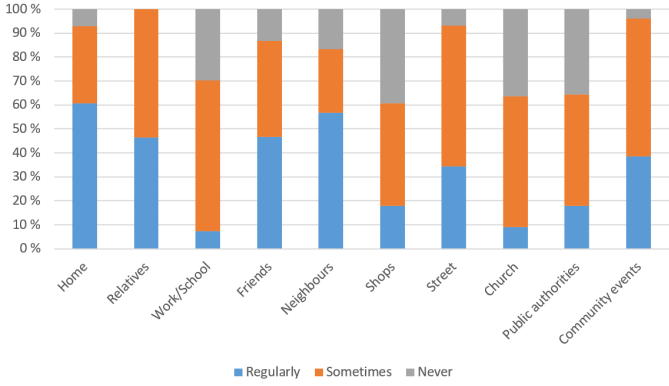

Figure 20 The use of Sindebele in public spaces, Limpopo Ndebele sample.

relatives and neighbors, and on the street, whereas in the public sphere it is far less regularly used (Figure 20). Only a few respondents claimed that Sindebele is regularly used at work or school or church, in shops and with public authorities. Instead of a possibility based on conscious language policies, this kind of use has a more concrete connection to the communication between individual people who happen to know the language background of their collocutor. Respondents claiming use of the language "sometimes" in various domains shows that it is widely used as a vernacular language, although there are obvious instances such as shops, public authorities, and even work/school where many respondents never use Sindebele.

3.3.4 Discussion

The pilot survey carried out among speakers of two Ndebele varieties in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces can be assessed both with respect to the prevailing language sociological situation and multilingual policies in South Africa, and case-specific pilot reports on local conditions. Although the coexistence of several languages and awareness of different Bantu groups was present during the interviews that were carried out face-to-face, this was never the primary context in which alternatives were scrutinized. When inquired, people could state without hesitation that isiXhosa, isiZulu, the respective Ndebele variety, and siSwati are all Bantu languages and are closely related to one another. However, as sociological issues often are, everyday language practices and community-level policies are predominantly a chain of routines revolving around language. Speakers of Ndebele varieties both in Mpumalanga and Limpopo are characteristically local residents, whereas their mobility does not tend to extend beyond the core area of the speech community. Local demography and population dynamics are more heavily affected by the high birth rate and the increasing importance of education and media during the past few decades.

While (southern) isiNdebele has a dominating position in the Mpumalanga sample, (northern) Sindebele of the Limpopo sample is influenced by a more unstable language sociological situation. While isiNdebele is the language that exhibits concretely South African multilingual policies in Mpumalanga, in Limpopo, public domains and even the private sphere to some extent often employ Northern Sotho as the default language.

Despite a shared ethnonym, Ndebele, the target groups are perceived as different communities, not only geographically but also linguistically. Although the parallel survey in two different areas was not directly addressed in the ques-

tionnaire, the informants either had no experience of the other language or described their unlike character.

Linguistically, the two languages undoubtedly share many grammatical and lexical features. However, it is equally easy to detect dissimilarities in the other examples, which proves that the claim of some Limpopo Ndebele speakers regarding the two as different languages is empirically based. Given that substantial differences in the essence of language are inevitably reflected in practical language policies, the availability of language products and public services, there are multiple reasons to investigate Limpopo Ndebele in more detail from different angles. It has special importance for the granularity of local conditions, while at a more general level, this particular area may show some relevant factors in terms of the sustainability of language policies in South Africa.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Divergent language sociological details are indispensable for an overview of the status of the two investigated Ndebele-speaking communities in Mpumalanga and Limpopo. In the given pilot survey these two particular groups were examined in the light of some basic language sociological parameters, which can be contrasted with one another in order to find out both case-specific and more general tendencies within the investigated communities. The main aims of this study consisted of (1) a parallel survey of two Ndebele focus groups in Mpumalanga and Limpopo, (2) contrasting the Limpopo focus group with a local Mokopane control group, (3) inquiring about oral basic language skills of the two focus groups, (4) inquiring about literal basic language skills, and surveying language use in (5) the private sphere and (6) the public sphere.

Language choice and the use of Ndebele at home and in various domains inseparably intertwine with other sociological models and trends. Population size, a very fundamental feature of sociological dynamics, for instance, was not taken into account in this survey. However, in the long run, more general demographic trends such as birth and death rate, migration, and economic conditions play a very important role in the development of any language community. In the Ndebele communities, the high birth rate and short intervals between generations in comparison with urban populations may trigger relatively rapid language sociological changes without any external catalyst.

The parallel survey of the two Ndebele groups by using an identical questionnaire showed some significant language sociological differences between the two groups. While Mpumalanga Ndebele is a fully viable language in terms of contemporary multilingual language policies of South Africa in most investigated

domains and the local environment of the speech community, the situation of Limpopo Ndebele is far more ambiguous and, as a matter of fact, several informants considered themselves as linguistically stigmatized, lacking basic language rights and public support.

Language planning and the implementation of language laws often depends on conceptualizing the crucial domains. In the case of Ndebele, the concept of Ndebele itself is ambiguous because it has a divergent semantic relationship with respect to language of a certain area, language of a more limited speech community, and language of everyday practices of a group of people. Consequently, the common ethnonym Ndebele partly blurs both language sociological and simple linguistic differences between the Mpumalanga Ndebele and Limpopo Ndebele. The current survey does not include any test of mutual intelligibility between these two variants. However, the alleged dissimilarity of the two Ndebele variants is strengthened by a different language sociological status and geographical distance disconnecting them areally.

The divergence in the results and language usage of Mpumalanga and Limpopo Ndebele reflect a fundamental language sociological difference. While Ndebele is the dominating language in Mpumalanga and has a stable status in everyday communication, Limpopo Ndebele has a much more limited sphere and language practices of individual speakers are strongly influenced by the dominance of Northern Sotho. Comparing intergenerational changes, some answers suggest that the local variant of Ndebele is being replaced by Northern Sotho in the long run. Some individuals emphasized the prestige of English but, in the given sample, this trend is not wide-spread.

In conclusion, we would like to state that in the light of the pilot survey, Mpumalanga Ndebele is a vital contemporary language, vital in the speech community in everyday life, including education and various other domains. The accessibility of any kind of language products such as written media and newspapers is not full-fledged yet, but this situation does not really hinder the development of the language in the contemporary world. It is also within this particular group that intergenerational transmission functions without interruption.

Limpopo Ndebele is facing a more challenging situation and lacks the public structures and support necessary for carrying out functions following the demands of the modern world. There is clear indication that this community is currently undergoing language shift as there are Ndebele families shifting to Northern Sotho, the locally dominant prestige language. While Northern Sotho is widely implemented as the medium of instruction at school, Limpopo Ndebele remains a means of oral communication, having a weaker foothold as a medium of education. However, in parallel with this trend, there are still many fami-

lies where Limpopo Ndebele is used with children, guaranteeing at least partial intergenerational transmission of the language even though it was claimed by some respondents that Ndebele children often prefer to use Northern Sotho in mutual interaction.

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APPENDIX I: HALS-QUESTIONNAIRE

South Africa, May 2016

All information gathered with this questionnaire is confidential and for non-commercial research purposes only. No personal data will be given to third parties or for commercial uses.

The questionnaire is based on:
https://fedora.phaidra.univie.ac.at/fedora/get/o:301101/bdef:Container/get/Attachment_1_Revised_Questionnaire.pdf

Number of questionnaire _____

Researcher _____

Date and place _____

A. BACKGROUND DATA

1. The informant is:

☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Tick box for the age of the informant:

☐ 18–29 years ☐ 30–49 years ☐ 50–64 years ☐ 65– years

3. The informant was born in

Country: _____

Town and village/suburb: _____

The informant now lives in (town and village/suburb): _____

since _____ (years)

4. Indicate your own **highest** level of education:

☐ No school education at all

☐ Basic education: primary school _____ years

☐ Vocational / secondary education

☐ I am a student at _____

☐ Higher vocational or academic education

5. What describes your occupational situation best today?

☐ I work/study outside home
☐ I work at home (e.g. housewife, farmer)
☐ I am retired
☐ I am looking for work/unemployed
☐ Other situation, please specify:

B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT LANGUAGE USE

6. What is/are your mother tongue(s) (the language(s) you learned first)?

☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

7. What other languages can you speak?

☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

LANGUAGE USE OF YOUR FAMILY

8. What language(s) do/did your **parents** use **between themselves**?

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other, please specify:

9. What language(s) does/did your **mother** use with you**?**

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other situation, please specify:

10. What language(s) does/did your **father** use with you?

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other situation, please specify:

11. What language(s) did you / do you **normally** use with your siblings?

☐ not applicable
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other situation, please specify:

12. What language(s) did/do your **grandparents** on your **mother's** side use with you?

☐ not applicable (my mother's parents were not alive or present in my life)
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

13. What language(s) did/do your **grandparents** on your **father's** side use with you?

☐ not applicable
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

14. What language(s) do you **normally** use with your current spouse/partner?

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other, please specify:

15. What language(s) do you **normally** use with your current spouse/partner?

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other, please specify:

16. What language(s) do you **normally** use with your children?

- ☐ not applicable
- ☐ Ndebele
- ☐ Zulu
- ☐ Northern Sotho
- ☐ English
- ☐ Afrikaans
- ☐ Tswana
- ☐ Other, please specify:

17. What language(s) does your spouse/partner **normally** use with your children?

☐ not applicable
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

18. What language(s) do you **normally** use with your grandchildren?

☐ not applicable
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

LANGUAGE USE AT SCHOOL

19. In the schools you attended, what language is/was the teaching medium?

☐ not applicable
☐ Ndebele
☐ Zulu
☐ Northern Sotho
☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Tswana
☐ Other, please specify:

NOTES

(I) WHERE HAVE YOU LEARNT **LANGUAGE X**?

☐	at home (from my mother, my father, my grandparents, or somebody else in my childhood family)
☐	from friends, neighbors, spouse/partner, or colleagues
☐	at school or in a language course
☐	in another way, please specify:
☐	not at all.

(II) LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

How would you evaluate your own knowledge of language X?

	Perfectly	Well	Fairly well	Poorly	Not at all
I can speak	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I understand (when spoken)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can write in	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can read in	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

(III) LANGUAGE USE

Indicate how often you use language X in the following contexts.

	Regularly	Sometimes	Never	The question doesn't apply to me
Home	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relatives	☐	☐	☐	☐
Work/School	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Neighbors	☐	☐	☐	☐
Shops	☐	☐	☐	☐
Street	☐	☐	☐	☐
Church	☐	☐	☐	☐
Public authority	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community events	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other domain, if relevant	☐	☐	☐	☐

(IV) STATEMENTS ABOUT THE USE OF LANGUAGE X WITH DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE

It is usual that people of a certain age or sex prefer using a certain language rather than another. Indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

	I totally agree	I agree	Difficult to say	I don't quite agree	I don't agree at all
young boys should use language X	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
young girls should use language X	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
adult men should use language X	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
adult women should use language X	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

(V) IS **LANGUAGE X** USED IN THE FOLLOWING DOMAINS (IN YOUR COUNTRY/REGION)?

	Yes	No	Don't know
Parliament	☐	☐	☐
Police office	☐	☐	☐
Tax office	☐	☐	☐
Health insurance office	☐	☐	☐
Employment office	☐	☐	☐
Hospitals	☐	☐	☐
Courts	☐	☐	☐
Ministries	☐	☐	☐
Regional and municipal offices	☐	☐	☐
Education	☐	☐	☐
Printed media (newspapers etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Radio	☐	☐	☐
TV	☐	☐	☐
Advertisements in public spaces	☐	☐	☐
Advertisements (commercials) in media	☐	☐	☐